

so I could kill them for you by valancysnaith

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Being an Asshole, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Lonnie Byers Being an Asshole, tags on point

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-26

Updated: 2017-12-11

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:20:55

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 2

Words: 3,655

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Max deserves so much better. The party is there for her.

(aka Die in a Fire Billy)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

raise your hand if you watched stranger things and wanted el and max to become BFF and everyone to love each other and billy to be miserable and alone (and not actually in this story) forever

The El and Max problem just about solved itself. There was a moment at the Snow Ball when El, staring dreamily around the crowded gym, saw Max with her arms around Lucas' neck and her head on his shoulder. It was impossible to miss that red hair. Mike knew the second it happened even with his back turned because El tensed up, then relaxed.

"Lucas and Max," she said in that soft voice. "They're like...you and me?"

"No one's like you and me," Mike said proudly. How many other kids at this dance had been through even a little of what he and El had? Losing each other and finding each other again, kept apart for almost a whole year but never going a day without talking, reunited only to have her disappear back to that horrible lab to save the world, *again*? She was like a magician or a superhero. There was no other girl in the world like El. (Also the thing with Max was a little unclear. Mike had spent most of the time since they met resenting her for not being El and resenting Lucas for not resenting her too, so they'd never actually talked about it.)

But El was looking at him like she was still waiting for an answer, so he tried again. "Lucas likes her. And Max must like him back, so, yeah, sort of, I guess. Like my sister and Will's brother, or like you and me."

"And for you...like another sister?"

"Max? Ugh, definitely." Mike's tone made it clear that he didn't like his sisters, biological or more generously defined, and would choose not to have them at all if that was an option.

El contemplated that with a little frown furrowing her eyebrows, a tic she must have picked up from the Chief. Like the thinking itself was physically painful. It was kind of adorable and better than that wide-eyed fear and confusion he remembered from when he first met her.

“Lucas is my friend,” she said eventually, and that was the end of it. Maybe there was a train of thought there—some transitive property of friendship—or maybe she was just happy enough that night to be magnanimous. The end result was the same. Not knowing what jealousy was, she didn’t know how to articulate its absence any more than she did its presence, but her actions spoke for her. At the end of the night before she scampered back out to Hopper’s truck, when everyone in the party had hugged her and she was teary with happiness, she hugged Max too, and they exchanged the kind of shy, tremulous smiles that made the boys squirm because, ugh, girls and their *feelings*.

It would have been easy after that, if anything about their lives was easy. But it wasn’t. Even with Jane Hopper’s birth certificate taped to the fridge and Will sleeping hours at a time with no nightmares, they had to be careful. You couldn’t fight the bad men like demodogs, once and it’s over for good, Hopper said. The bad men were patient and sneaky. So they just had to be *more* patient and even *sneakier*.

After a month he decided that it was safe enough to bend the rules twice a week: on Wednesdays to go the Byers’ for dinner, and on Saturdays for the party to come to the cabin. El didn’t really understand why he changed his mind but she was too happy to care and hugged him for so long that he had to pry her off, grumbling and trying to look annoyed instead of overwhelmed.

Then she made him promise, just to be extra safe.

So it became routine for Steve or Mike’s mom pick up the boys and drop them all off at the Byers’ (El hid if it was Mike’s mom, the same way she hid in the back seat of Hopper’s truck while they drive through town). Max got picked up too at first. She always met them at the end of her dark driveway, pale and small in the glare of headlights. No one had ever been in her house or met her parents and no one ever asked to, either, even Mike’s mom, who’d never met a pleasantry she didn’t like.

One Wednesday night Max's backpack was slung over her shoulder and her skateboard was under her arm too.

"Would Will mind if I spent the night?" she asked, hesitant.

"No way!" Dustin said, at the same second Mike offered, "Or you can stay with me, if you want. There's a ton of room in the basement."

Not to be outdone, Lucas chimed in, "Or me, if you don't mind sharing a room with Erica."

"Cool," Max said, finally smiling a little. She squeezed in next to Lucas, jostling for room as Steve pulled a gut-wrenching U-turn and gunned it back down the dark road.

"Everything okay?" Steve tossed over his shoulder, so nonchalant, except he was giving her face a searching once-over in the rearview mirror at the same time.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure."

"Stepbrother giving you any trouble?"

Max shrugged.

They all remembered the night El closed the gate. Steve remembered least because head trauma kept him in the hospital for a week and left that whole night fuzzy. He had trouble with school for awhile, still forgot words sometimes. Hopper arrested Billy the next day but his parents posted his bail immediately and when Steve woke up he didn't want to press charges. He said he just wanted to get better, for things to go back to normal, and he didn't want the kids to relive that night or spend any more time around that loose cannon than they had to.

Except Max lived with that loose cannon. That was her normal. She was different now after what she'd been through—they all were—fiercer, more confident, a little older and a lot wiser, but she was still stick-skinny and so much smaller than Billy. Sure, he was scared of her at first and even more scared of his dad but Max wasn't naive enough to think that his fear would outweigh his anger forever. It never had before.

He was so, so angry, her stepbrother.

So she stayed smart, bluffed her way through the rides with him to and from school, kept a bag packed and her door locked, and said everything was fine whenever Steve or Hopper or the boys asked. What could any of them do, anyway?

But this time her mom and stepdad were gone and Billy had been drinking for hours, his music ratcheted up until the bass sounded like it was pounding on her door, trying to get in. She knew how nights like these ended. So she grabbed her bag and books and skateboard, slithered out her bedroom window, and found the words to ask for help.

Will loved the idea, of course he did. He hated being by himself now, had a tendency to turn his brain too far inward and get lost in there, searching for uninvited guests.

“I like having someone else here, so I *know* I’m not alone,” he told Max as they piled sleeping bags on the floor of his room after dinner, unzipping them like blankets. “Because if it’s just me and I *feel* like I’m not alone, especially in my head, that’s...”

“Like before,” Max said.

“Cause for concern,” Will mimicked, doing a pitch-perfect imitation of a doctor from the lab who probably wasn’t alive anymore. Max giggled even though it was morbid and he smiled back.

“Now do Chief Hopper,” she said.

Will’s Hopper impression was even better—“Hey, Red, don’t say I didn’t warn you about hanging around with that no-good Byers kid and his dumbass friends”—complete with drawl and put-upon sigh and imaginary cigarette, and Max laughed so hard she fell over. Will looked worried and proud of himself at the same time.

“You’re lucky if he’s your new stepdad one day,” Max said into the darkness after Joyce had tucked them both in and said goodnight, more relaxed the way she always was after Hopper and El came to dinner. “My stepdad is the worst.”

“Mean, angry, drinks a lot?” Will guessed. Max didn’t say anything but he heard her head move on the pillow as she nodded. “Sounds like my real dad.”

Max swallowed, but her voice was still a little thick when she whispered, “He hit people too?”

“Yeah,” Will sighed, light and soft like it was so long ago he could hardly remember, or had happened to some other kid. Back then the scariest thing he’d ever seen was his dad’s hands coming at his throat with no time to duck away and the most helpless he’d ever felt was when Lonnie snatched the phone and hung it up right before he could scream their address to the 911 operator. That old Will Byers didn’t know anything about the Upside Down or the Mind Flayer. But at least those were demons you could defeat in battle and know they were gone, that you were safe. Even with what he knew now and all he’d been through, Will wouldn’t trade places with his younger self for anything.

He turned over so Max could see his pale face looking down at her on the floor, his big eyes shining. “Max, are you okay? Like, are you safe?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.” She mustered a shadow of that cool-girl smirk. “Sometimes it’s safer to be somewhere else, that’s all.”

“You can come here, you know. Any time.”

Smiling was so much easier when she meant it.

The routine adapted fast to her bringing her school things with her and staying over with one of the boys, usually Will or Mike. El begged Hopper to let Max come home with them too—especially on Saturdays since she was *already there*, why couldn’t she just *stay*?—and set her jaw stubbornly when he explained that all their secrecy and being smart would have been for nothing if Max’s family came looking for her and found the cabin.

“It’s a no-brainer, kid,” he said, while El held Max’s hand and fumed silently. “Stupidest thing we could do. I’m sorry.”

Max tried to help. “It’s okay, El. Steve already got hurt, and I’m not going to put you in danger too because of my family—”

“Not family.”

“What?”

“Not. Family,” El repeated. “Family keeps you safe. Family means... means home, and protecting, and compromise, and no one leaving even when you’re sad or mad or sick. Your family is *us*. Not those... bad people.”

Max didn’t know what to say so she just hugged El instead, because while some of it lacked nuance some of it was *true* in that way that you felt instead of knew. To give them a minute of privacy, Hopper went to the window and gave Joyce the thumbs up that Max was on her way out and the argument was over—for now. El wasn’t taking no for an answer on this one. They’d had the same conversation three times in as many months and odds that they wouldn’t have it again by spring were grim.

Maybe he’d be better at winning this particular argument if he didn’t secretly agree with her. The Hargrove men were fucking pricks and he’d serve them with restraining orders in a heartbeat if Max or her mom said the word...but without that he could only worry, and seethe, and wonder when he’d adopted six kids instead of one.

Then came the Saturday night that Steve’s car skidded to a stop in her driveway and Max wasn’t there.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Max is okay. Billy gets what he deserves.

Notes for the Chapter:

A generic version of Vicodin was released as a prescription painkiller in 1983.

All the boys were talking so loud and all at the same time, which wasn't so different from how it always was except they sounded scared.

No, not scared. Hopper had taught her that there were different levels of scared and all of them had their own words and it was good to know them so she didn't freak him out saying she was *scared* when what she really meant was *dreading something* or *anxious* or *worried*. *Scared* meant *do something now, danger*. Everything else was just a feeling. Things could still be okay.

The boys sounded *worried*. But really worried.

"We waited twenty minutes, no sign of Max," Steve was telling Joyce and Hopper.

"I snuck around the side of the house and knocked on her window but it was locked and the shade was down and the lights were off," Lucas added, while Dustin and Mike, refusing to be left out, contributed all the information they could think of by shouting it.

"The whole place was really quiet, like *creepy* quiet—"

"She seemed fine at school yesterday—"

"—sometimes we can hear yelling inside but not tonight—"

"—Will told us you were bringing meatloaf, Mrs. B., she'd *never* miss that—"

“Hey, *hey!* What have I told you kids about *one at a damn time.*” Hopper pointed at Steve. “It’s his turn. The rest of you can help by shutting up.”

Steve shrugged, casual like he always was. “Like I said, Chief. We waited twenty minutes. It was a *little* creepy...but look, what kid hasn’t caught a 24-hour bug or gotten grounded for something dumb? I’m sure she’s fine.”

El frowned. Friends didn’t lie. Why was Steve lying now? He wasn’t sure Max was fine at all. And neither were Joyce or Hopper even though they kept talking like they were, using calm grownup voices that she recognized by tone even if she didn’t know all the words sometimes. Especially now, when everything was moving loud and fast and no one seemed to know what to do.

It hit her suddenly that she was being so stupid. Without saying anything she went to the TV, turned it to a dead channel, and reached for the blindfold.

“El?” Mike said, and she looked over her shoulder to see that the static buzz had caught everyone’s attention. She gave them a small smile. Even though she was mostly worried about Max too, there was a part of her that was happy she could be helpful, that she could do this one thing for them after all they’d done for her.

“It’s okay. I’ll find her.”

Then she was in that other place. It was dark and empty and echoed as she turned in a slow circle, trying to orient herself. Max was here somewhere. She looked for the glint of that red hair but the harsh neon lights of a modern kitchen caught her eye first. El walked toward them, cautious but curious. There was a woman standing at the sink, scrubbing a plate. From a distance she looked perfectly composed but as El got closer she saw that the woman’s shoulders were tense and her hands were shaking. She had Max’s hair.

Like someone was turning the volume up, two male voices started to become audible, then rose, then kept rising into shouts and screams. El didn’t understand a lot of these words either but for once she didn’t mind; she could tell from the tone that they were mean and

hateful. She'd never met either man but she knew they belonged to Max's stepdad and stepbrother, and that this happened a lot. That wasn't the different thing about tonight.

Something *was* different, though.

There was a bed alone in the dark beyond the light of the kitchen. Red hair spilled across the white pillowcase and out from under the blanket pulled high.

"Max?" El called. She started running. "Max!"

The blanket stirred and a familiar pajama-clad arm wriggled free. One blue eye blinked sleepily as Max mumbled, "El?"

"You aren't here," El said, meaning the cabin.

"You are. 'S'like magic."

Max smiled and reached out, winding their fingers together and tugging until El sat down on the bed. El squeezed back but her stomach felt all squirmy and wrong in the way that Hopper had told her meant *dread*. Max's affection was a fierce, volatile thing—tight hugs, playful shoulder punches, overprotectiveness and always ready to fight anyone who'd hurt her friends. Not sweet and gentle like this.

"Are you sick?" El whispered.

"My mom gave me something. A pill."

"Why?"

Max scrunched up her face like she was being asked something deeply annoying—to eat vegetables or do homework—and tucked into the pillow, trying to burrow away from the question.

"...Ow."

El knew a muffled grunt of pain when she heard one.

"Max!"

Reluctantly, Max rolled onto her back with one hand cupped over the eye that had suddenly pressed hard against the pillow. Her hair had fallen over it before but now El brushed the tangled strands away, all her usual hesitation about physical contact gone, and saw deep purple and blue bruising around the eye socket. El had never seen a black eye before, except on soap operas. It spread underneath Max's whole eye and up along the side of her nose, bright colors that could have been pretty if they didn't also mean her friend was in pain.

"Jeez, don't freak out," Max muttered, in response to whatever expression was on El's face. "It'll be fine in a few days. It just *looks* bad."

"Who?"

It took hearing herself for El to realize that her jaw was clenched, her breath coming fast, and her hands balled into fists. Max started to roll her eyes and then stopped, wincing. She seemed like herself again, short-tempered and impatient instead of loopy from the drug.

"This is why I didn't want anyone to know. I *knew* you'd all go nuts and try to like, *fix things*."

"Fix things?" El echoed.

"Protect me, or whatever."

"Family means protecting—"

"No, family means people you're stuck with and you can't get away from even if you want to. It's a—a *trap*, that's what family means. Don't you get it? Unless my mom figures out his dad is a total shithead, Billy's going to be there forever. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing *any* of you can do."

By the time she stopped, breathing hard, Max's eyes had filled with tears.

"I can," El said. "I can make him go away."

"What?"

"He hurt you. You're scared." El said it like she couldn't believe she needed to elaborate.

"I'm not scared," Max insisted, scowling.

"Friends don't lie," El said gently, because she was learning that sometimes they did and it wasn't to fool her, it was to fool themselves when they didn't want to admit something or things were too hard. And she'd picked her word carefully, the way she picked all her words. Scared meant *do something now, danger*. Someone needed to do something, because Max was in danger. And El could do things no one else could.

"I can make sure he never hurts you again," she said.

The corners of Max's mouth twitched like she was fighting back a smile. "Are you offering to kill my stepbrother?"

El was quiet long enough that the smile faded and Max's eyes went wide.

"Jeez, I was joking! El, you can't—"

"He hurt you," El said again. She knew she was supposed to say no, of course not, she would never misuse her powers like that and killing was wrong and even though she'd done it to protect herself and her friends before with no regrets she would never do it again. But she still hesitated. So many bad people got away with bad things and no one did anything, even Hopper whose *job* was to do something. But he said he couldn't without things like "evidence" and "witnesses" when everyone knew that really bad people didn't leave any trace of the bad things they did. Billy had made a mistake this time but even with the proof on her face, Max would tell the boys and concerned teachers that she tripped; her eye would get better in a few days; and that would be it, until the next time.

And because nothing ever happened to Billy, he would never change.

Unless...

"Not kill," she said. "There's a better way."

Well, maybe not better, but definitely less messy.

“What are you going to do?” Max asked, still nervous but intrigued now too that she was sure murder was off the table.

El gave her a small smile. “Flip a switch.”

She gave Mike the same smile a few days later when he asked her if she’d done anything to Max’s stepbrother, because Max said he wouldn’t look at her or talk to her and every time he tried he went green with nausea and had to leave before he threw up. Even the silent car ride to school in the morning with her in the passenger seat left him pale and sweaty. Max told the story like it was funny, joked that he’d developed an allergy to her, but there was a lightness to her like relief that made the boys think she was grateful for it, however it had happened.

“You did do something, didn’t you?” Mike whispered when no one else could hear, conspiratorial and proud of her. “Like with Troy in the gym that time when he pissed himself in front of everyone? It’s not just moving things with your brain. You can *change* people, override their instincts.”

El shrugged, all innocent. “No evidence.”

Mike kissed her on the cheek, which made her blush and meant so much more than all his rambling words, though she liked to hear him talk too.

Max didn’t talk nearly as much as Mike, but the next time she came to the cabin—skin healed, blue eyes shining with happiness—she wrapped El in the tightest hug she’d ever had and kissed her on the cheek too, and neither of them ever said anything to the boys or the adults about why.

Notes for the Chapter:

"Oh, I just wish someone would try to hurt you so I

could kill them for you"--Frank Sinatra, according to Shirley MacLaine.

As an adult obviously this is so super creepy, but when I was younger I thought it was poetic, almost romantic. There's something pure and visceral about it that reminds me of El.